



Lesson Eight

Bent's Fort Mini Book

Goal: The students will be exposed to the history of Bent's Fort, its impact on the opening of the West and the cultural exchanges that occurred there.

Objectives:

- acquire knowledge of Bent's Fort
- understand the importance of Bent's Fort in the opening of the West
- recognize Bent's Fort's uniqueness as a trading post
- create illustrations that reinforce written information
- write an acronym, name poem, for Bent's Fort

Colorado Model Content Standards Addressed:

History: K-4 (3.1, 3.2) 5-8 (4.1, 4.2)
Mathematics: K-4 (2.4) 5-8 (2.3, 6.1)
Reading & Writing: K-8 (components of 1,2,3,4 and 6)
Science: K-4 (3.1, 3.2) 5-8 (3.1, 3.2, 5.1)
Geography: K-4 (2.3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4)
5-8 (2.3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3)

Materials Needed:

- a copy of the Bent's Fort booklet (included)
- long neck stapler (or some other means to connect pages of book)
- drawing and coloring supplies

Activity One:

Pass out printed pages for the Bent's Fort Mini Book. Fold the pages in half and arrange them so 1 & 10 are on the bottom, 3 & 8 are in the middle, and 5 & 6 are on the top.

Have the students write on the blank pages numbers 2, 4, 7, 9. Fasten the booklet together at the spine using a long neck stapler.

Activity Two:

Decide how it works best for your class to read and share the information in the mini booklet. Discuss and question to check for comprehension.

Activity Three:

Each student will need to design a cover for the booklet. It should include a title and an illustration that pertains to the information inside the booklet.

Activity Four:

Page 2: Create an illustration for The Father Of The Santa Fe Trail story on page 1. Be certain that the picture and story relate.

Page 4: Create a name poem, an acronym, using the letters: B-E-N-T-S F-O-R-T. The words

must relate to Bent's Fort and the 1800's.

Page 7: Pretend you are an Indian. Write a letter to the President of the United States describing your feelings about the events that are changing your world or as an employee of Bent's Fort to someone back home telling about your life in the west.

Page 9: Use the top half of the page to create an illustration that reinforces the buffalo article.

Page 9: Use the bottom half of the page to create a list of ways that the buffalo and its parts were used in the 1800's.

The Father Of The Santa Fe Trail

In the early 1800's, the Santa Fe Trail was more of a path than a road. When William Becknell headed out west in 1821, he traveled with pack mules loaded down with trade items. He intended to trade with the Indians as Spain controlled Mexico and it was dangerous and illegal to trade with them. However, in 1821, Mexico gained its independence from Spain and the Mexican people were eager to trade. Becknell was in the right place at the right time. He traded his items with the Mexican people and made a lot of money. He realized that much more money could be made if more could be hauled by using wagons. Up to this time, wagons had not traveled on the Santa Fe Trail. Word of Becknell's successful trade with Mexico spread quickly upon his return to Old Franklin, Missouri.

Becknell supplied himself with 25 wagons weighted down with trade goods. The trail was 900 miles long and travel could be dangerous. They traveled in large groups to discourage Indian attacks. Blowing sand, constant dust, violent storms, and intense heat made travel difficult. The trip would take two to three months. Becknell was successful and the Santa Fe Trail was the most important trade route in the U.S. Territory. It created a bond and dependency between different geographical regions and the cultures of each. William Becknell came to be known as "The Father of the Santa Fe Trail."

The Buffalo

In the early 1800's nearly 50 million buffalo roamed the North American continent. The buffalo was a strong and agile animal that could survive in any climate. They could live through droughts and dig through the snow to find food.

The Indians saw magic in this giant beast and worshipped them in ceremonies. The sun and buffalo was their center of life. The buffalo was important to the Indian economy. As the buffalo migrated so too did the Plains Indians. The coming of the railroad introduced a new problem for the buffalo. Adventurous weekend hunting tours were arranged. Men traveled west on the railroad killing as many buffalo as possible for sport. No one ever imagined that by 1889 only 540 buffalo would remain and the Indian's life blood would be cut off. The blatant slaughter of the buffalo threatened the very existence of the Native Americans and eventually led to blood shed and war.

Building Bent's Fort

Charles Bent was a trapper in the Rocky Mountains and had learned how successful trade could be. He was convinced that a trading post on the Santa Fe Trail could be a money making business. So Charles Bent, his brother William and Ceran St. Vrain formed a partnership and they decided to build a trading post along the Santa Fe Trail where they could trade with the trappers from the mountain and the Indians of the plains. The company supplied goods and services to the travelers on the trail and to the villages of the Rio Grande Valley while still being in U.S. Territory. The Arkansas River was the boundary with Mexico and provided water, food and grass.

One hundred workers from Taos and Santa Fe were hired to come and build a giant adobe "Castle On The Plains." They dug pits and filled them with a mixture of dirt, grass, and water. Oxen mixed this mud mixture with their hooves. The adobe was packed into wooden molds and brick by brick, the construction of the fort continued until it was completed around 1833. It was the first permanent American settlement on the Great Plains.

Difficult Times

Time passed and Mexico became increasingly worried about the border. The Mexican people remembered what happened to Texas and they were fearful that they too would lose their independence to the U.S. Bad feelings continued to grow. Higher taxes were placed on the trade wagons entering Mexico and talk of war was in the air. Eventually, Santa Fe was captured without a fight in 1846 by General Kearney. Charles Bent was appointed the first governor. Hostility remained and in 1847 Charles Bent was murdered by an angry group of Mexicans and Indians.

The Soldier's presence frightened the Indians. They were also frustrated over the loss of their traditional hunting and camp grounds. Part of the buffalo herds were wiped out. Cholera, a disease brought in by white man was spread and killed many people. The Indians had become dependent upon the White Man's goods and barter and trade became a way of life. Once the Indians began using these goods, they did not want to go back to their ancient ways.

The Santa Fe Trail was getting more and more crowded. These travelers were more interested in getting to where they were going quickly and were not as concerned with what effect they had on the land.

They overgrazed the land, muddied the waters, cut down precious trees for fuel and killed off the animals.

The gold rush, disease, decline of the buffalo, and loss of grass made Bent's Fort a more difficult place to live and work. William Bent was no longer able to run the business as usual. William Bent abandoned the fort in 1849.

Bent's Fort History

Bent's Fort became a gathering place where people of many different cultures came together to trade. The Indians, especially the Cheyenne, brought their buffalo robes to the fort and traded them for glass beads, knives, cooking kettles, abalone shells and steel arrowheads.

The Mountain Men brought beaver pelts to the fort in exchange for blankets, guns, tin pots, lead, food, tobacco, animal traps and anything else they needed to survive in the mountains.

Trader goods from the Mexicans included food items such as beans, rice, chili peppers and woolen blankets called *jergas*. In return they traded for items they needed.

Charles Bent and Ceran St. Vrain managed stores in Taos and Santa Fe and William Bent managed Bent's Fort. Charles Bent traveled East on the Santa Fe Trail with oxen drawn Conestoga wagons filled with furs. He would return with wagons full of trade goods.

In the early years the beaver pelt was in great demand. These pelts were pressed into bales and shipped back to Missouri where they were made into beaver hats. These hats were sold all over the world to wealthy men who wore them as part of their dress up attire. When silk hats became the new fashion craze, the demand for beaver pelts dropped off and they began to trade more for buffalo robes. Hundreds of thousands of buffalo robes were traded and sent back East during the 1830's and 1840's.

Bent's Fort had been successful for over 16 Years. It brought together people of different cultures and opened up the West. Times were changing and the railroad would soon be the new Conestoga wagons.

Fort Employees

William Bent hired many people to help him run the fort. He married a Cheyenne Indian, named Owl Woman and spent time away from the fort with her Cheyenne family.

The head trader, the fort factor, was responsible for running the trade business during William Bent's absence. He had to know how to read, write and do numbers so he could keep the ledgers. The blacksmith made all the metal items used at the fort such as hinges, door handles, latches and steel strikers. He was responsible to repair metal wagon parts as they came to the fort. The blacksmith made horse and oxen shoes. After hundreds of miles of travel many animals were sore footed and in need of new shoes. The carpenter and the wheelwrights worked to keep the wagons rolling. After making the long journey on the dry prairie the wagons were usually in desperate need of repairs.

Charlotte was responsible for cooking food. She was famous among the fort visitors for her slap jacks and pumpkin pie. At times there was even a doctor at the fort. He would bleedSome people said the cure was worse than the ailment. Kit Carson was hired on as a hunter to provide meat for the people living at the fort. The Mexican laborers were continually building and repairing the adobe and were very skilled at handling the live stock. Bent's Fort enjoyed a thriving business for many years.